Creating a responsive environment

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http://ianpbell.wordpress.com/communication-in-vi-children/

A list of all the articles in the series is provided on the website.

This article is based closely on a document used to support the Communication Policy adopted at RNIB Pears Centre for Specialist Learning. As Lead Speech and Language Therapist there, I took the lead in writing the original document in 2010.

For further information about RNIB Pears Centre for Specialist Learning, go to www.rnib.org.uk/pearscentre

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**Introduction**

Creating a responsive environment is regarded as a fundamental requirement for facilitators supporting people who have visual impairment and additional needs.

A responsive environment is one in which the person

- obtains responses to what he or she does
- is given opportunities to respond to other people
- is allowed to take the lead in interactions.

Being responsive and facilitating the ability to take the lead in interactions is essential if three other Key Principles are to be applied:

- letting the person take the initiative
- giving the person control
- encouraging the person to be an active communicator.

Intensive Interaction is likely to be a central part of the approach employed for many people who have visual impairment and additional needs. There is considerable overlap between the strategies used in Intensive Interaction and those required for creating a responsive environment. Perhaps the most important overall strategy can be summarised in the acronym ALLOW which specifies some fundamental skills facilitators require for creating responsive environments.

\[
\text{ALLOW} = \text{Always Look, Listen, Observe, Wait}
\]

Responding effectively requires facilitators to build up an extensive body of knowledge about each person they support. This can only be achieved through observation, which means looking and listening carefully. This, in turn, means waiting. Waiting is vital when facilitating communication in people who have visual impairment and additional needs. In addition to

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1 See article 7.
2 See article 8.
3 See article 9.
4 For information about Intensive Interaction, go to [http://www.intensiveinteraction.co.uk/](http://www.intensiveinteraction.co.uk/) (Website accessed 19/04/12.)
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providing opportunities for observation, it is also crucial for facilitating the ability to take the initiative.\(^5\)

Initially, waiting can seem counter-intuitive and many facilitators feel very uncomfortable when they first try waiting. This is because practitioners feel as if they are doing nothing when waiting. Saying nothing and waiting can make facilitators feel self-conscious, especially when the person with visual impairment and additional needs does not quickly initiate and the waiting goes on for some time.

However, facilitators who are waiting are not doing nothing – they are looking and listening and waiting for the person to initiate. The looking and listening will contribute to learning about the individual. The waiting will allow the person the time to take the initiative.

Sometimes it is necessary for the facilitator to wait for what seems like a very long time. But there really is no other way (Andersen-Wood and Smith, 1997).

Of course, it is not only important to facilitate the ability to take the initiative. It is also necessary to facilitate the ability to respond to other people. This, too, requires facilitators to wait, to provide the person with the extra time he or she needs to process all the information in the situation (including any communication), and to formulate a response.

A truly responsive environment for a person with visual impairment and additional needs is one in which there is a supportive communicative environment.\(^6\) Many people with visual impairment and additional needs require a communicative environment in which facilitators adopt a Total Communication approach.\(^7\) In addition, many people in this group have sensory needs which need to be addressed. This is particularly true with regard to people who have autism in addition to visual impairment. Meeting sensory needs is a complex issue which cannot be explored here. Those interested (including those working with people who do not have autism) are referred to the resource pack developed by the Visual Impairment and Autism Project (2011).

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\(^5\) See article 7.

\(^6\) The Communication Profile described in article 4 supports the specification of the communicative environment the person requires.

\(^7\) See article 2.
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Following a person’s lead

As far as possible, facilitators should follow any lead made by the person with visual impairment and additional needs. They should do so even if they have to change tack – it may be necessary to abandon what was planned in order to respond effectively to the person. When a person initiates (whether intentionally or not), facilitators should respond

- immediately
- as often as possible
- in such a way that they follow up the person’s contribution and invite them to take another turn
- positively and sensitively.

Responding positively and sensitively does not mean immediately meeting every demand the person makes.\(^8\)

For people at the earliest stages of communicating it is particularly important to use Intensive Interaction, as it provides many opportunities for the facilitator to follow the person’s lead. In essence, facilitators who use this approach employ the strategies used naturally by parents when they engage with their babies and infants in the first two years.

What should facilitators respond to?

Facilitators should respond to as many intentional initiations as possible. This is relatively easy in relation to people who produce some speech or who use some signs. Facilitators should certainly respond to

- appropriate questions
- statements that indicate interest in or engagement with events, people, objects
- all requests (see above).

However, it can be difficult for facilitators to decide which behaviours to respond to when the person is not using any symbolic means of

\(^8\) See article 8.
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communication. In making the selection, it is useful to consider whether the person does anything

- which could be developed into conventional communication
- which is easy to observe
- frequently.

Behaviours which could be developed into conventional communication
Some people produce vocalisations which might develop into speech. For example, a person might produce a vowel sound similar to the initial sound in apple, followed quickly by a vowel sound similar to that in go: a – oh. Facilitators could respond to this behaviour by approaching the person and saying Hello! Some people might enjoy having their hand shaken in this situation.

Some people make arm or hand movements which could develop into personal signs. For example, a person who likes playing with a ball might make vertical hand flapping movements. Facilitators could respond to these movements by presenting the person with a ball whilst saying and signing ball.

Behaviours which are easy to observe
These are useful, as they are more likely to attract the attention of facilitators and are easier therefore to respond to.

Behaviours which occur frequently
These are also useful, as they will provide plenty of opportunities for facilitators to respond to the person.

The facilitator’s position relative to the person
There are, perhaps, two main factors to consider here:

- the person’s needs and preferences
- the need to observe and respond to the person.

It is essential to take account of the person’s needs and preferences. For example, if the person needs a great deal of personal space, facilitators should respect this and not come any closer than the person can tolerate. Gradually, as the person becomes familiar with each facilitator
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and the activities they share, he or she may build up greater trust and feel comfortable with facilitators coming in closer.

A person with severe physical disabilities might be most interactive when lying on his or her side on the floor, so the best position for the facilitator might be lying alongside.

Some people, especially those with autism, do not cope in face-to-face situations. The person may feel very uncomfortable, or threatened or may find being face-on to someone else aversive or over-stimulating. It may be preferable for facilitators to position themselves alongside, or even behind, the person.

Being behind is obviously far from ideal when interacting and communicating with someone. But this may need to be the starting point. Gradually, if facilitators are effective communication partners, the person will become familiar with them and the activities they share. He or she may build up greater trust and feel more comfortable with facilitators adopting a more natural communicative position.

It is also important that facilitators ensure they can observe and respond to the person, and provide him or her with opportunities to take the initiative. The most obvious and natural position is to be in front of the person, slightly to one side and about two to three feet away. Such a position provides a good view of the person, and enables the facilitator to hear him or her. Thus, this is a good position for observing the person.

It is usually best for the facilitator to be slightly lower than the person; this is because many people find it threatening to have someone else close by, looking down on them. In addition, it is natural for the communicative partner who is higher to assume the dominant role. However, that is not the appropriate role for facilitators. The main task of facilitators is to provide the person with opportunities to take the initiative, and then to respond. It is therefore crucial that facilitators do not dominate conversations or periods of interaction.

Often some experimentation is necessary before the best position is established. Some flexibility may be helpful, so the person becomes able to interact, whatever the position the facilitator adopts.
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Avoiding distractions

It is also important that facilitators avoid being distracted when engaged in a conversation or period of interaction with a person who has visual impairment and additional needs. This means avoiding being distracted by other people, including colleagues. Some environments are very busy. They may not be appropriate places for conversations or periods of interaction. It may be better for the facilitator to take the person to a less distracting environment.

It is, of course, also important to prevent the person becoming distracted. Some people find it very difficult, even impossible, to focus on another person and engage in a conversation or period of interaction when there is a lot of movement around the room, music is playing in the background or other people are vocalising or speaking. Such environments may not be appropriate places for conversations or periods of interaction. Again, it may be better for the facilitator to take the person to a less distracting environment.

Some people cannot readily engage with another person in their own very familiar environment in which they have a range of favourite items; in such an environment they can become very absorbed with a favourite item, and so be unable to engage with another person. For example, consider Ted has a music keyboard in his room, and spends a great deal of time in his room playing it. Ted does not abandon playing his keyboard to interact with another person. It is much more effective for the facilitator to invite Ted to interact when they are in a “neutral” environment where he is less likely to be distracted by his keyboard.

Being responsive at all times

When a person with visual impairment and additional needs is not actually engaged in interaction with anyone, facilitators should try to be aware of what that person is doing. If the person initiates in some way, a facilitator should, if possible, interrupt what he or she is doing and respond. A facilitator who responds in this way to a person’s initiative, is putting into practice one of the most important principles of facilitating communication.
Inviting a person to have a conversation or period of interaction

The best way for a facilitator to become engaged in a conversation or period of interaction with is to respond to the person. This is because one the most important principles of facilitating communication is to facilitate the ability to take the initiative.\(^9\) Therefore, the more the person takes the lead, the better. In the early stages, the person may do something without intending to initiate a conversation or period of interaction. But the facilitator should respond as if the person had intended to take the initiative. In time, the person may come to initiate interaction intentionally.

However, it is not always appropriate for a facilitator to wait for a person to initiate in some way. For example, the facilitator may want to engage with a person who is very difficult to respond to. There are several reasons why it can be difficult to respond to a person with disabilities.

Some people move in and out of alertness very frequently and rapidly, and may spend a considerable amount of time asleep. Those who have epilepsy may have frequent seizure activity, severely reducing the time they are alert and aware.

Some people, perhaps especially those with self-stimulatory behaviours, engage almost continuously, in a very self-absorbed manner, in repetitive behaviours. These people often leave no gaps in their behaviour, which makes it impossible for another person to respond.

Other people are extremely passive, spending considerable amounts of time without doing anything to which another person can respond.

A few people fluctuate between periods of continuous, self-absorbed behaviour and apparent complete passivity.

Therefore, opening a conversation or period of interaction can be very difficult. In some circumstances, the facilitator may need to invite the person to interact. The first thing the facilitator must do in such a situation is to gain the person’s attention. There are two stages to this:

\[^9\text{See article 7.}\]
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1. first the facilitator should check that the person’s attention is available

2. then the facilitator should attract and hold the person’s attention.

The person’s attention is likely to be available when he or she is awake and alert, but not engaged in an activity.

Various strategies are available for gaining attention. What works with any particular person may depend on circumstances, and so change from one occasion to another. Potentially useful strategies include:

- exaggeration
- using touch
- gaining eye contact
- singing the person’s favourite song
- using a significant object that the person finds motivating.

**Exaggeration**

There are several ways to exaggerate the voice, but they need care. One way is to speak louder than normal, but this may startle, worry or over-stimulate the person, or others. It is also possible to speak slower than normal, but again, care is needed. This is because speech becomes distorted if it is too slow.

The facilitator’s face can also be exaggerated. For example, facial expressions can be made more obvious: glitter, make-up, or even glasses can be worn. The latter may seem unlikely, but some facilitators who alternate between spectacles and contact lenses find that some people are more interested in them when they wear their spectacles.

Movements can also be exaggerated, but again, only if this does not startle, worry or over-stimulate the person, or others.

**Using touch**

Great caution needs to be exercised in relation to the use of touch, perhaps particularly with people who have autism or cerebral palsy in addition to visual impairment.

Many autistic people find touch very difficult. Light touch especially can be very baffling and even aversive. On the other hand, many autistic
people enjoy very firm touch. However, this is almost always on the autistic person’s terms, when he or she requests it, and not when it is given, uninvited. Touch, then, may not be appropriate when inviting an autistic person to engage in a conversation or a period of interaction.

Some people with cerebral palsy respond to touch by retracting their muscles, and pulling away. This is a reflex response, and does not necessarily indicate that the person dislikes being touched. But it means that touch is inappropriate when interacting with some people who have cerebral palsy.

Many people with visual impairment and autism, and many who have visual impairment and hearing impairment, are described as tactile defensive. However, this may actually be an inappropriate description. In fact, it should not be surprising that someone with little or no functional vision startles and pulls away when touched suddenly. Even if you speak first, the person may not anticipate being touched, especially if he or she also has little or no useful hearing.

In addition, many people with visual impairment and additional needs dislike someone taking their hands. This is, perhaps, for two reasons. First, people with visual impairment and those with dual-sensory impairment require their hands to gain information about the world. Second, if someone else holds and directs their hands, they have no way of anticipating what that person will do.

Rather than taking the person’s hands, the facilitator should offer his or her hands gently to the person in a hand-under-hand fashion. By doing so, the facilitator is, in effect, inviting the person to take his or her hands. If the person does so, the facilitator can maintain contact by moving slowly and sensitively. If the person does not want to engage through hand contact, he or she can easily withdraw. It is essential that the facilitator respects this.

Gaining eye contact
A commonly held belief is that person B must be in eye contact with person A in order to attend to what person A says. This is not the case. It is perfectly possible to attend to someone without looking at them. Indeed, in typical conversations, neither the listener nor speaker maintains constant eye contact with the other person. Each partner frequently breaks off, and then seeks to re-establish eye contact.
It may be useful for a facilitator to establish eye contact with a person initially, before entering into a conversation or period of interaction. However, it is not necessary to do so.

It is now recognised that many autistic people find it very difficult to make eye contact, or even to look at another person’s face. Great caution therefore needs to be exercised in relation to the use of eye contact with autistic people. Several factors can be involved in this.

For example, autistic people do not readily understand facial expressions and become anxious when they are unable to interpret another person’s facial expression. It can be particularly difficult for autistic people to interpret a neutral facial expression, which they may think indicates anger.

Faces are also very stimulating, and looking at another person's face can result in some autistic people becoming over-stimulated.

A related factor is that many autistic people are single channelled: they can only cope with sensory information from one sense at a time. Thus, many autistic people are simply unable to look at and listen to another person at the same time: they can either look at the person, or listen.

Facilitators should not, therefore, attempt to open a conversation with a person who has autism by trying to gain eye contact first. In the course of the conversation or period of interaction, the person may make eye contact. If so, the facilitator should respond to this sensitively and positively, perhaps by smiling. However, no attempt should be made to sustain eye contact for longer than usual.

**Singing the person’s favourite song**

This is often an effective way to open a period of interaction. Some people respond best when the facilitator sings the whole song. Having completed the song, it is important for the facilitator to pause to allow the person to have a turn in the interaction.

Other people join in with the facilitator, in some way, and may continue when the facilitator stops singing; others indicate that they wish to take over, and that the facilitator should stop. Some people do not actively participate until the facilitator pauses, when they will take over and complete that segment of the song, or even provide the whole of it.
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It is important that the facilitator does not simply sing to the person. Doing so does not involve the person as an active participant in a period of interaction. The facilitator should frequently wait, to offer the person opportunities to initiate, for example by indicating in some way that he or she wants the song again, or by requesting another song. If the person indicates that the facilitator should sing the same song again, the facilitator should say (and if appropriate, sign) again.

Music is very meaningful to many autistic people and to many visually impaired people. It is important that facilitators share experiences with people who have visual impairment and additional needs. Sharing experiences requires that facilitators build on a person’s interests and skills. Facilitators should therefore establish whether the people they are supporting are interested in music or have musical ability.

Using a significant object

Presenting the person with a favourite item may be a useful way to invite interaction, but this very much depends on the nature of the item and how the person typically uses it. For example, a ball or toy vehicle can be used in simple to-and-fro games; building blocks can be used in constructing and then demolishing a tower. But such activities should only be used if the person actively engages with them.

Some people enjoy using a large physiotherapy ball, a swing, rocker or trampoline. All these can provide excellent opportunities for facilitators to interact with the person. Again, it is important for the facilitator to interrupt the person’s use of the item. This will provide the person with opportunities to initiate, for example by indicating in some way that he or she wants the activity again. If the person indicates this, the facilitator should say (and if appropriate, sign) again.

It may not be effective to employ an object that the person uses in a self-stimulatory fashion. This is because the person may become very absorbed with the item, and so fail to attend to the facilitator. However, it may be possible for the facilitator to engage the person in interaction by employing a pair of items. The facilitator should use an item identical (or very similar) to that used by the person, and should mirror the person’s behaviour; this may cause the person to attend to the facilitator and may elicit interaction.

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Some people with visual impairment and additional needs benefit from the use by each facilitator of a personal signifier. This is an item which is unique to each facilitator; it identifies the facilitator. The personal signifier may be a bracelet, a badge, earrings or a necklace which the facilitator wears. On initiating contact with a person, the facilitator invites the person, using the hand-under-hand approach, to touch the personal signifier. (Naturally, it is important to be aware of health and safety issues, for both participants; no item which could cause injury should be employed as a personal signifier.)

For a male facilitator, the personal signifier could be his face, as this will feel very different from those of his female colleagues; this is especially true, of course, if he has a beard.

Some facilitators use a perfume as personal signifier, but, of course, care is needed to ensure that no-one else wears the same one.

**Inviting the person to take a turn in the conversation**

The ideal is that the person initiates the conversation or period of interaction. But, as noted, it is sometimes necessary for the facilitator to do so. The facilitator may also need to invite the person to take a turn in the conversation or period of interaction. The simplest way is for the facilitator to pause: stop speaking and moving; look, listen, observe, wait.

As has been explained before, the facilitator may have to wait for what seems like a long time, and this may feel very awkward, especially at first. But there really is no other way. Many people who have visual impairment and additional needs require extra time to process information (including communication) and to formulate a response. In addition, they are likely to have a history of being passive, and of expecting other people to take the lead; being invited to take the initiative may be a novel experience.

Whilst waiting, the facilitator should adopt an expectant facial expression, and so look interested. But it is important to remember that the person has limited skills in interacting. Thus, even if the person has sufficient functional vision, he or she may not readily understand the facilitator’s facial expression. This means that the person may not realise that the facilitator is waiting for him or her to have a turn. This is especially likely if the person has autism.
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Promoting emotional understanding

Many people with visual impairment and additional needs have difficulties recognising and understanding their own emotions and those of other people. This is especially true of those with autism. Unfortunately, relatively little seems to be understood about the acquisition of emotional understanding in typically developing children, and certainly not in children with disabilities. This means that it is not possible to specify with any confidence strategies for promoting emotional understanding in people with significant disabilities.

However, there is evidence that the typical baby learns about emotions when the parents respond to the baby’s own smiles, cries, frowns and so on. The baby cries, and the parent reflects this with a sad face; the baby smiles, and the parent smiles back. Thus, an essential element in the early interactions between typical babies and their parents is emotional sharing and the modulation of levels of arousal. Later, parents label the typical infant’s emotions whilst the child experiences them. In this way, the child comes to have some understanding of what it is to be sad, happy, angry, fed up, excited, tired and so on.

People with visual impairment and additional needs may well have had fewer such early experiences. It is also likely that their experiences will have been of a different quality. Their early lives will probably have provided fewer opportunities to promote emotional development.

It is unlikely that emotional understanding can be promoted with the use of photographs or other pictorial material, or by asking people to say how they feel. This is not how typical children learn about emotions, and there is no reason to suppose this will support such learning in people with visual impairment and additional needs.

However, it does seem possible that people can learn about emotions by experiencing many periods of effective interaction with familiar, trusted facilitators who genuinely reflect every aspect of their behaviour. When interacting with a person, the facilitator should respond to the person’s emotions by reflecting them. This should serve to make the person feel more valued and understood, and should help the development of emotional understanding.
Concluding remarks

Creating a responsive environment can appear to be a very complex task when it is broken down into its many components, as in this article. In reality, it is not, in fact, so difficult. The crucial attribute for facilitators is that they should be motivated to establish effective communication with each person. Although the following quotation (adapted from Newson, 1979; p210), has been used elsewhere, it is relevant here, too.

*Communicating with* [a person who has visual impairment and additional needs] *is obviously possible long before the magic day* [which may never come] *when* [he or she first utters a] *spoken word*. *What is not so obvious is that* [communicating with such a person] *is a learned skill available to anyone who is concerned to master it with any particular* [person] *i.e. by anyone who is motivated to make the necessary effort and to give up the necessary time to establish a working dialogue with one particular human.*

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11 See article 6.
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References


**Newson, J. (1979)** 'The growth of shared understandings between infant and caregiver.' In M. Bullowa (Ed.) *Before Speech.* Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press.


To simplify the text and make it more readable, references to other original sources have been omitted. The strategies described above have been drawn from many years of practical experience. In addition, the following works are highly recommended:


**Ware, J. (2003)** *Creating a Responsive Environment for People with Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties.* London: David Fulton. 2nd edition